'Average Americans' change with times

By Paula Ellis

Richard Johnson sat alone in the kitchen, hurriedly scraping his fork across the dinner plate. It was a Wednesday evening and his four teen-aged children were going their separate ways.

In a frantic rush, doors opened and closed as a daughter left, a son arrived and a confused search for misplaced hockey tickets began.

Dick Johnson

Dick and his wife Mary Ann would be leaving soon for choir practice as they have every week for 20 years. But first, they had to talk about being average.

Television's National Public Affairs Center of Washington dubbed them the Average Americans in 1972.

For six years, the Johnsons' way of life has been studied and publicized on television as the typical American existence. The Rolling Meadows couple say they know many people think anything suburban is dull. So, being the typical suburbanite should be even duller.

When Mary Ann talks about "all those suburban things like PTA meetings," she likely will roll her eyes or complete her thought by saying, "how boring" and sighing.

Dick, 49, will softly, delicately and kindly assure you he's no more typical than anyone else. "I have my highs and lows," he says.

As for being typical:

Sure, the Johnsons moved from the city to the suburbs in 1954.

Sure, they say they have bought most of the things they own on time.

Sure, Mary Ann, 42, works part-time as a secretary to make ends meet.

Sure, there are four cars in the driveway.

Sure, they, like most parents who never went to college, say education is the key to their children's success.

And sure, their bilevel home is on a slightly curved street in a planned development.

That's just the way the Johnsons say they like it.

The pace is fast in suburbia, they say. For Mary Ann, a major part of suburban life is fighting the traffic to chauffeur one child somewhere and then turning around and battling the same traffic with another child as a passenger.

Dick's is quicker than he would like. He commutes 21 miles to work as a credit manager at an Evanston steel firm. He enjoys only the few recreational activities he can sandwich in while coping with the stresses of working in an industry that isn't as economically healthy as he would like.

"Competition dictates this type of life," he says. "When you have a higher standard of living, the pressures and stresses are much greater."

The Johnsons say they are wealthy enough not to be eligible for government subsidies, but aren't rich enough to live luxuriously.

"Everything is a struggle," Dick says.

The Johnsons say their lifestyle remains typical of suburbia. The television and newspaper exposure, however, have changed some things.

Constantly being asked to speak for the middle-class suburbanite has made them more politically aware.

"When I listen to a Presidential speech, I listen with a much sharper ear," Mary Ann says.

Since 1972, when the Johnsons started sharing slices of their life with the viewing public, fan mail has poured in. So has another kind of mail.

"We got lots of hate mail," says Mary Ann.

Most of the notes from persons across the country, however, thank the Johnsons for sharing their warmth and sincerity with TV viewers they've never met.

How folks became 'average'

No computer wizardry was responsible for choosing Dick and Mary Ann Johnson as the Average Americans.

In fact, they never were meant to represent average statistics compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau, according to the former television producer who helped pick them.

The National Public Affairs Center of Washington chose the Johnsons of Rolling Meadows in 1972 to represent "the broad range of the middle class, who are too wealthy to benefit from government welfare," said former TV producer Bob Lissitt. Now Lissitt works as a White House television consultant.

After selecting several typical suburbs, the public affairs team producing a series of election-year broadcasts interviewed several Rolling Meadows families.

"I picked that suburb because I am a Chicago native," Lissitt said. The Johnsons were chosen because they were articulate and congenial, he added.